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PARIS FOR ARS (DWINTON)

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SUBJECT: BENIN: CONFERENCE ON RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT: INTERFAITH  
DIALOGUE

11. SUMMARY: On September 10, 2009, the US Embassy in Cotonou hosted a conference on the theme: Religion and Development: Interfaith Dialogue at the American Cultural Center. The American Embassy seized the opportunity of Ramadan to express solidarity and share President Barack Obama's message with Muslims in Benin who constitute about 20% of the population. This gathering also served as an opportunity to get local stakeholders' feedback on what approaches would be of greatest interest to them to pursue in partnership with the United States of America. END SUMMARY.

12. Program description: The conference program consisted of 2 panels: the first one was made up of the Political / Economic Officer and the Director of the Beninese Center for Studies and Research on Islam, El Hadj Bachir Soumanou. Both speakers gave a presentation, highlighting the key political priorities of President Obama.

The second panel included the leaders of 3 different religions in Benin: Islam, Christianity and Voodoo. In their presentations, the speakers put an emphasis on the importance of communication to foster interfaith dialogue.

Prior to the conference, a letter with the transcript of President Obama's Cairo speech was sent to the Muslim community's leaders, inviting them to spread the content of the speech in their respective communities and discuss with the members of their communities and associations, ideas, concerns and suggestions to support President Obama's call for a new beginning with the Muslim world.

Post also held an Iftar dinner at the CDA's residence on September 16, 2009, to celebrate Ramadan with Muslim contacts. This Iftar was designed for religious leaders, the preachers, High Muslim officials, and gathered Imams from all leading Cotonou-based mosques. Also in attendance were the leaders of Muslim and Youth Association, as well as Muslim women's associations. This dinner served as an opportunity for the Chargé to relay President's Barack Obama's Ramadan message, and pinpoint his vision about interfaith dialogue. Post distributed calendars on the Diversity and the richness of Islam in America as gratuities to the guests.

13. MPP UMBRELLA THEMES AND AUDIENCE REACHED: Promoting Human Rights and Mutual Understanding. 50 participants including religious leaders, Islamists, Women and Youth associations, journalists, NGO members, students, alumni and other interested guests attended the conference that was covered by all major media outlets including TV, radio and print media. Estimated audience reached: 3.5 million. 25 guests attended the Iftar.

14. IMMEDIATE RESULTS /IMPACT: This program was designed to bring together the leaders of the local religious communities, representatives of the civil society and members of the government of Benin, in order to listen to them and make an assessment of their concerns, with regard to what they think can be done by the Government of the United States to improve their relations with the rest of the world. Our guests participated actively in this program. The conference gave the local stakeholders a unique opportunity to voice their opinion on how to advance President Barack Obama's

policy priorities, as outlined in his Cairo speech. All were unanimous on fostering the dialogue between the U.S.A and the world for a better understanding, through exchange programs. They stressed the role the U.S. should play as leader, to help developing countries fight poverty and corruption, and promote peace keeping, good governance, justice, democracy, education, and most especially girls' education and women's empowerment. Participants also brainstormed and identified a blood drive community project in response to President Obama's call for an Interfaith Day of Service. A follow-up committee of 10 members will be responsible for having this project implemented.

¶5. NON-USG SOURCES OF IN-COUNTRY FUNDING/IN KIND SUPPORT: Post appreciated the participation of the local speakers, including the Muslim IV alumnus Abdoul Jalili Yessoufou, Imam of Aidjedo Mosque.

¶6. QUALITY OF USG SUPPORT: Excellent. The Bureau of Information of the State Department made available the transcripts of President Obama's Speech and other informative materials that were distributed to the participants.

BOUSTANI